

June 14, 2016

HIGH WINDS AND “IRONS”

By Dan Muss

Sailboat racing on Deep Creek Lake in very high winds can be exciting...but dangerous. This is because a gust that is half again as strong as the prevailing wind can also come in at a different angle knocking the boat over before the crew can react and ease the sails for the new direction. Another thing that can happen is a wind gust that changes direction that puts the boat directly into the wind from a close-hauled point of sail. In heavy seas the sailboat soon loses speed and, since the boat has to be moving in order for the rudder to steer, the boat stops and is in the grips of the wind; it's called being in 'irons'. The only way out is to back the sails and sail *backwards* in order to regain 'helm-way'.

The PRO for Saturday's race was David Meehan and he and his committee had their hands full; he filed this report:

“I knew it would be a wild day from the start. Although a sunny and warm day, the signs of fair weather were slightly deceiving. At 9 a.m., the wind was already around 10 knots or greater, and it continued to build. When 10:30 rolled around, the race committee crew boarded the Committee Boat, cautious yet ready to face the howling plight that awaited them.

The race committee this weekend consisted of Andy and Debbie Carrier, my wife, Emily, and my friend Laura. Poor Laura hadn't the slightest clue of what she was getting herself into, for she is not a sailor. This hardy crew barely made it across the lake towards Bull Run with all the wind, but they prevailed and assessed the conditions. It was blowing a steady 15-17 knots with gusts up to 20 knots from the southwest, conditions even seasoned sailors take caution in. After reading the shifts and puffs, we dropped a windward mark and made our way downwind to set the leeward mark. The wind was tenacious yet consistent, making it relatively easy to set a course, and, after some fine adjustments, the course was set, ready to battle any soul brave enough to face it.

The half hour gun was promptly sounded at 11:30, and 25 boats warily sailed out to the course and began to hail in. The first problem struck during the starting sequence, when Mary Tran's mast collapsed before she even began to race. Luckily, the mast fell sideways into the water and no one was hurt; they quickly gathered the mast and the sail to prevent it from sinking. The steadfast race patrols were on the scene and rapidly towed them to safety.

The starts were orderly, except when Ray Gauthier snuck in by the Committee Boat at the start and fouled several boats. Ray refused to do his penalty turns and continued racing. Even before the starts were complete Scot 4606 capsized about a 3rd the way up the 1st windward leg. Fortunately, they were able to right the boat, but retired and sailed back to port. After all the races were successfully started, the committee began their voyage up the perilous lake to set the finish line. Once set, real problem struck as several more boats began to capsize or retire from equipment failure. Scot 2250, Larry Anderson, "death rolled" and turtled on the downwind leg and spent the rest of the afternoon rescuing his boat. Also, one of the saltiest sailors of them all, Joni Palmer, capsized in a Flying Scot for the first time in her life and lived to tell the tale. (Joni was not at the helm.) Many others began abandoning the race. The faithful race patrol boats were eager to aid the troubled boats, and two other motorboats from Deer Haven ventured out into the chaos to patrol due to the abundance of accidents.

Ray Gauthier won for the Gold Fleet, but apparently the race was a journey of self-discovery for him because he admitted his earlier mistake once at the finish line. Upon finishing the race he retired from the race, This made it so that John Meredith, sailing in on a silvery breeze, across rough waters, won the race. The boats continued to file across the finish line with several close finishes to follow. One of those being Mark Schaefer beating Josh Bullock by less than an inch.

Finally, it was done. Laura was overwhelmed with how exciting sailing races can be.

When the boats were safe in port we discovered that only 16 out of 25 boats finished the race. This, along with gusts of 24 knots, made us cancel the second Saturday race."

In the Masters race Vandall was ahead of Gregory but Gregory slipped inside at the leeward mark and then led most of the way to the finish. But then he got into 'irons' and Vandall breezed by him to win.

Finally we have to hear about Larry and Debbie Anderson's 'death-roll':

“With only four boats competing in the Masters Fleet, we had a great start and led the fleet most of the way to the windward mark. A few hundred yards from the mark, however, we fell into irons. During our recovery from irons, Vandall and Gregory passed us, so we rounded the mark a close third. Rounding the mark, Larry released the boom vang to relieve stress on the boom, which he had pulled into a banana shape to flatten the mainsail going to windward. He left some vang on to keep the top batten roughly parallel with the boom – in retrospect, that was not enough boom vang for the conditions!

A few moments later, sailing very fast downwind wing-on-wing (with the jib and mainsail on opposite sides), the boom suddenly began to lift and the boat started heeling to windward. A “normal” capsize to leeward starts with too much pressure on the main, and loosening the mainsheet solves the problem. Here that technique was to no avail. Wind had gotten *behind* the mainsail and was causing the boat to capsize to windward. Two possible factors: a momentary shift may have caused the boat to sail “by the lee,” or the lifting boom allowed the top-most part of the main sail to effectively jibe from the starboard side to the port side. Whatever the cause, the effect was immediate. We were tossed into the water, and the wind drove the mast like a knife-edge into the water. The boat immediately turned turtle, with no opportunity to swim to the mast-head and prevent that occurrence. It turns out that this type of capsize is not rare in the Laser fleet. Laser sailors refer to it as a ‘death roll’. Once it starts, nothing can be done to stop it. Prevention is the only cure, by keeping the vang tight and avoiding sailing by the lee at all costs. Observing the proceedings from shore, Darrell Van Hutten marveled at the cavalier non-use of the vang downwind by most Flying Scots: a Laser sailor would have recognized the danger!

Recovery from the capsize was time-consuming, since the boat totally filled with water and was kept from sinking only by the inflated bow air bag and the Styrofoam under the seats. With two patrol boats collaborating, the towing bridle was strung beneath the bow and behind the shrouds, and Larry unscrewed the 4-inch water ejection cap from the stern. Starting slowly at first and then accelerating, the boat slowly rose as water flowed out the stern ejection port. As the boat came up, Larry watched in amazement as a solid stream of water gushed out. When the boat had just a few inches of water left in the bilge, he screwed the ejection cap back in and enjoyed a leisurely tow to the mooring.

In retrospect, this was a pretty happy capsize (except for the lost chance to catch Vandall and Gregory.) Nobody got hurt, the water was surprisingly warm (heated partly by adrenaline, no doubt), and the only serious material loss was the ditty bag. Alas, the ditty bag contained Debbie’s regular eyeglasses, so she has gone Hollywood this week, relying on her prescription shades!”

Race Results [skipper/crew(s)]

Saturday, June 11:

Flying Scot Gold: 1 John/Lisa Meredith, 2 Bruce Spinnenweber/Sue Wolffe/Mike Hall, 3 Ellen Tran/Seth Copley & Anthony Celso

Flying Scot Silver: 1 Eric von Eckertsberg/Crew, Jeff/Julie Haseler, 3 Keith Spinnenweber/Crew.

Flying Scot Masters: 1 Frank Vandall/Debbie McCombs/Crew, 2 Dick/Doug Gregory.

Sunday, June 12:

Races Cancelled

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